

A sermon for the week following the Transfiguration 17th August 2025

Jeremiah 23.23-29, Hebrews 11.29-12.2 and Luke 12.49-56

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight – o God the ground of our being, the breath of our life and the source of our liberation. Amen.

It is good to be back with you today. I loved being with you a few weeks ago as we said goodbye to Fr David and wished him well for his retirement. And I understand that you will be welcoming a new interim priest soon. My prayer for you all is that you continue to be a courageous community that is open to change while preserving the core of supportive care that you provide for each other. That you will remain firmly rooted in faithfulness as you walk your path – trusting God and trusting each other as you walk boldly into your next chapter of life together.

The letter to the Hebrews that we heard today echoes this call on repeat – by faith by faith by faith – and it ends with this encouragement: “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”

We follow Christ as we run the race of faithfulness – here in this place. We face whatever comes by faith.

Our Gospel today is found exactly halfway through the book of Luke - deep in the middle of chapter 12, in which Jesus is teaching his disciples. Remember that Jesus isn't Western and doesn't think or speak linearly – he is middle eastern and he speak in circles, in parables, in stories and in symbols. We don't need to worry too much about understanding it all intellectually. It is meant to be perplexing! Let the words wash over you and feel what the stories reflect and open in your own hearts and minds.

Listen to Jesus teaching his disciples: “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division...”

This feels like a reflection of climate emergency. It is a baptism by fire. And then after highlighting family conflict, at the end of the reading Jesus offers Met Office style weather warnings. It is not so much prediction as it is an anguished acknowledgment that we cannot avoid the trouble. There is foreboding etched deeply in Jesus's words and spirit. Jesus is recognising the Signs of the Times. He is recommending clear sightedness: Read the weather patterns. Pay attention and be ready to answer the call to action.

This is another chapter about faithfulness. Steadfastness. Even in times of crisis. Even when the conflict extends into our own families and homes, we are called to stand firm. Division is inevitable. The test is not in avoiding the trouble. The test is how we move through the storm.

So where do we find ourselves in this moment in terms of the church calendar - and also historically and globally? How do we interpret the present time?

Well, Friday marked 80 years since the declaration of Victory in Japan. Friday was also the Feast of the Assumption (or Dormition) of Mary the Mother of God. And we have only just recently come back down to earth after the dazzling mountaintop experience of the Transfiguration.

This past week I received an email update from the Sabeel Centre <https://sabeel.org/> in Jerusalem – Sabeel means “the Way” in Arabic and it is an ecumenical grassroots movement advocating for liberation theology, founded in Jerusalem in 1988 by a collective of Palestinian Christians. My parents, who lived for 7 years in Jerusalem, introduced me to the good people at Sabeel more than 20 years ago. I want us to pay attention to Palestinian voices – Palestinian perspectives.

Sabeel released this statement last week drawing the obvious parallels:

“August 6 and 9 of this year marked 80 years since the United States dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing between 150,000 and 246,000 people, most of whom were civilians. On the anniversary, hundreds of protesters in Japan came to protest, carrying messages of “No Nuke, Stop War” and “Free Gaza! No more genocide.” The Environmental Quality Authority in Palestine already reported back in November 2024 that at least 85,000 tons of bombs, which is (the equivalent to) over 6 Hiroshima atomic bombs, have been dropped on Gaza since the beginning of the war. This was reported many months ago, so you can imagine the number is only greater now, with those estimating it as now over 100,000 tons of bombs (or 8 Hiroshima atomic bombs).

“At Sabeel, we want to offer a prayer to remember the past and current victims of empire. May we continue to resist everywhere there is injustice and oppression:

“Holy God, we remember with sorrow the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where unimaginable loss and suffering scarred generations. We mourn the lives taken and the continuing legacy of violence that still haunts our world. We pray for the continued strength to choose peace, to reject violence, and to stand with all who cry out for justice and dignity. Lord in your mercy... hear our prayer.”

I ask you to reflect on this burning question: What have we become that we can justify the arms industry? The normalisation of this kind of mass violence is an indication of our collective inhumanity. The musician Frank Zappa calls politics “the entertainment division of the military-industrial complex.” What we are seeing is that we do not learn from history – because war is profitable for governments. The horrors unleashed on the hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians of Japan continue against the innocents of Gaza.

Another Palestinian organisation called The Holy Land Trust released this message this past week:

“On the morning of 11 August, Gaza’s sky was filled not with news, but with the deafening silence that follows an airstrike.

Al Jazeera’s **Anas al-Sharif**, one of Gaza’s most courageous voices, his colleague **Mohammed Qreiqeh**, a dedicated cameraman, as well as Ibrahim Zaher, Mohammed Noufal, and Moamen Aliwa along with two others, were killed when an Israeli missile obliterated a clearly marked press tent outside Al-Shifa Hospital. They died while doing what they had always done—bearing witness to the suffering of their people, speaking truth to the world when it would have been easier, and safer, to remain silent. Their work – like ours at the Holy Land Trust – was rooted in the belief that telling the truth is not just a duty, it is an act of resistance.

Anas, Mohamed and their colleagues knew the risks. In Gaza today, journalism is one of the most dangerous professions in the world. And yet they chose to stand in the line of fire armed only with cameras and microphones.”

Remember this: “You only target journalists when your enemy is the truth.”

“The thief will never be the owner.”

Consider who plants the olive trees and who destroys them.

There is an Arabic word “Sumud”, which means steadfast. It attests to a sacred resistance which is our duty in situations of injustice - we must continue to bear witness. We are unforgivable for the destruction that our countries and our tax dollars and pounds have perpetrated – and yet – we do not have the privilege of ignorance and avoidance and apathy and guilt and shame that locks us into inaction. We have a responsibility to act up and work for a better future. One in which we confess our wrong doings and make amends. Have you seen the mass arrests that are happening when people stand up for Palestine Action? I have heard that many of those getting arrested are over 60. I am proud of the priests who are getting arrested in their clerical collars.

We cannot surrender to despair. We are people of the resurrection. It is our responsibility to sow seeds of hope. To work for peace. To break the cycles of violence and evil.

Fire burns – but it also purifies – fire regenerates. It can be the symbol of disaster (the wildfires that are the mark of climate emergency) – but it is also the symbol of collective engagement. Let’s fight fire with fire. Let’s burn down the empires that do not care for the vulnerable. And let me be clear: we are all vulnerable. If others can be dehumanised and slaughtered – we can all be othered. We are all at risk. No one is truly safe or free until everyone is safe and free. The only solution is to love our neighbours and to pray for our enemies so doggedly that they are transformed into people about whom we care – because we witness their humanity and they come to witness ours as well.

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Let us turn in our pew leaflets to the poem by Clare Bryden (a local artist and scientist who also used to work at the Met Office!). But before I read it to you – I want to explain the reference to “the bells of Urakami”. Clare is talking about the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Nagasaki that was incinerated with more than a thousand Christians inside who were preparing for the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. Christians like us – not Japanese enemies – we killed our own brothers and sisters. When we seek to destroy our enemies – we harm, dehumanise and destroy ourselves.

Listen to Clare’s poem:

VJ Day 2025

(for Caroline and Michael) © Clare Bryden, 27 April 2025

And there was a great light,
and their clothes became dazzling white
and the appearance of their faces changed.

And there was a cloud overshadowing them and they were terrified as they entered it.
And they kept silent.
Behold the man!
A shadow etched into a wall
still.
Stand to face his hypocentre.
See the seared civilian flesh
on his right hand
and hear the hundreds of thousands of shadows prophesying
an unpeopled future.
Some have tried to lift their voices but what voices can be lifted
when they have been silenced?

Little boy and little girl
fat man and thin woman—
we the billions exist in spooked oblivion.
Once a year or perhaps one day a decade our shadows tell us it is time
to pay attention to the remnant on his left hand
crying out crying
for the rule of law and justice and peace! peace! peace!
But they too have been silenced.
There has been no peace no peace no peace for the shadows
who cannot submit to such a hollow victory.
Their broken hearts cannot be bound up. They were emptied out way back.
Nor will the blinded recover their sight
when the forces of evil must be unleashed to combat the forces of evil.
And there will be no release for captives released
to stumble their way back
to an indeterminate existence
remarking in their silence

that war makes no heroes—
heroes know only the shame shadowing them
for pity's sake!
Where the bells of Urakami tolled
a thousand penitents making their confession
will be cindered again and again and again until—
Be still.
Listen.

I echo Jesus' call to all Christians to accept a baptism by fire – to plant seeds of love and hope and true peace which passes all understanding. We are called out of the darkness to bring light; to be a Hope squad. We do not have the luxury of despair. The late great archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu said: "if you are neutral in situations of injustice you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Remember that: Telling the truth is an act of sacred resistance.

We must stand firm – by faith by faith by faith. Sumud - steadfastness

In closing, listen to an excerpt from the last will and testament of Palestinian journalist Anas al-Sharif:

"I entrust you with Palestine—the jewel in the crown of the Muslim world, the heartbeat of every free person in this world. I entrust you with its people, with its wronged and innocent children who never had the time to dream or live in safety and peace. Their pure bodies were crushed under thousands of tons of Israeli bombs and missiles, torn apart and scattered across the walls.

"I urge you not to let chains silence you, nor borders restrain you. Be bridges toward the liberation of the land and its people, until the sun of dignity and freedom rises over our stolen homeland. I entrust you to take care of my family. I entrust you with my beloved daughter Sham, the light of my eyes, whom I never got the chance to watch grow up as I had dreamed. I entrust you with my dear son Salah, whom I had wished to support and accompany through life until he grew strong enough to carry my burden and continue the mission.

"I entrust you with my beloved mother, whose blessed prayers brought me to where I am, whose supplications were my fortress and whose light guided my path. I pray that Allah grants her strength and rewards her on my behalf with the best of rewards. I also entrust you with my lifelong companion, my beloved wife, Umm Salah (Bayan), from whom the war separated me for many long days and months. Yet she remained faithful to our bond, steadfast as the trunk of an olive tree that does not bend—patient, trusting in Allah, and carrying the responsibility in my absence with all her strength and faith.

I urge you to stand by them, to be their support after Allah Almighty. If I die, I die steadfast upon my principles. I testify before Allah that I am content with His decree, certain of meeting Him, and assured that what is with Allah is better and everlasting. O Allah, accept me among the martyrs, forgive my past and future sins, and make my blood a light that illuminates the path of freedom for my people and my family. Forgive me if I have fallen short, and pray for me with mercy, for I kept my promise and never changed or betrayed it. Do not forget Gaza... And do not forget me in your sincere prayers for forgiveness and acceptance.”

Let this light a fire in you. Our baptismal calling is to follow the one who burns through false peace – to anchor in the deep peace by doing the work of justice and freedom for all. Amen.

The Readings today:

Jeremiah 23: 23-29:

Am I a God nearby, says the Lord, and not a God far off?

Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the Lord.

Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord.

I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal.

Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the Lord. Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Hebrews 11: 29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Luke 12: 49-56

‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.’

He also said to the crowds, ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, “It is going to rain”; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, “There will be scorching heat”; and it happens.

‘You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?’